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**The micro-politics of organizational change in professional youth football:  
Towards an understanding of ‘the professional self’**

<sup>1</sup>Luke Gibson\*

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8401-8480>

<sup>1</sup>University of Derby

Sport, Outdoor and Exercise Science

&

<sup>2</sup>Ryan Groom

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7633-3846>

<sup>2</sup>Manchester Metropolitan University

Department of Exercise & Sport Science

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\* Corresponding author: Luke Gibson, Sport, Outdoor & Exercise Science,  
Department of Life Sciences, College of Life & Natural Sciences, University of  
Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby, DE22 1GB [l.gibson@derby.ac.uk](mailto:l.gibson@derby.ac.uk)

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## **The micro-politics of organizational change in professional youth football:**

### **Towards an understanding of the ‘professional self’**

#### **Abstract**

Organizational and managerial change plays a significant role in the employment and working lives of coaches in professional football. However, research that explores how individual coaches experience the change process is limited. The aim of this article is to explore the experiences of Ian (pseudonym), a professional football academy youth coach, during the process of organizational change. Data were collected through field notes, informal observations and meetings, formal academy team meetings, co-worker interviews, and four semi-structured in-depth participant interviews. Findings were analysed through a *micro-political* framework, with a focus on *professional self-understanding*. They reveal the importance of *micro-political literacy* in understanding the impact of organizational change on the participant’s working conditions and continued employment. It is proposed that an understanding of *micro-politics*, *professional self-understanding*, and *micro-political literacy* should be developed in formal coach education programmes to better prepare coaches for the realities of employment in professional football.

**Key Words:** Organizational Change, Micro-politics, Professional Self-understanding, Professional Football.

## **Introduction**

Professional football is typified by the increasingly polarizing financial funding structures of a small number of rich clubs and a large number of clubs that operate with scarce financial resources, which impacts the working lives of the individuals they employ and who rely on professional football as their primary source of financial income (Gibson & Groom, 2018a, 2018b; Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Huggan et al., 2015; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b, 2014). Although professional football clubs are an important part of the social fabric of many societies, there are surprisingly few studies that examine the working conditions and experiences of employees within the professional clubs (Gibson & Groom, 2018a, 2018b; Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Huggan, Nelson, & Potrac, 2015; Ogbonna & Harris, 2015; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b; Roderick & Schumacker, 2017). This is important, as Roderick (2006a) has highlighted that ‘professional football is a form of entertainment work that is highly contingent in the sense of lacking long-term security and breeding a pervading sense of insecurity’ (p. 245). Those working within professional clubs quickly gain an appreciation of the labour market, limited employment tenure, and surplus of potential labour to achieve organizational goals (Roderick, 2006a).

Given the dynamic nature of employment within professional football, potential financial rewards and the opportunity to utilize market labour forces to the advantage of employers; many professional teams have utilized organizational change as a catalyst to initiate large-scale overhauls of staff employment enacting a neoliberal ‘performance review agenda’. Indeed, during the 2017–18 English Premier League season, eight of the twenty managers who started the season had lost their employment by the end of January (League Managers Association, 2018). Following each managerial departure, the coaching staff aligned with the manager also left their employment positions with

the clubs. However, there is a paucity of research that explores the working lives of professional football coaches during periods of organizational change and, in particular, how coaches experience the process of organizational change (Gibson & Groom, 2018a, 2018b).

Conceptually, organizational change encompasses “directing (and redirecting) resources according to a policy or plan of action, and possibly also reshaping organizational structures and systems” (Teece, 2012, p. 1398). Within the context of professional football, organizational change may include changes to the club owners, Chair, Chief Executive Officer, Board of Directors, Sporting Director, First Team coaching staff, academy staff, and support staff (e.g. medical, sports science, performance analysis, player care, education and welfare, etc.). Organizational change may also result from policy change in the sport by governing organizations such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the English Football Association (FA), and the English Premier League (EPL). However, the impact of organizational changes in professional football upon the employment of individuals remains an important yet underexplored area of empirical research.

The significance and originality of this work lies in providing rich contextual, empirical insights to advance our understanding of the social complexities of working within professional sport. In particular, this work aims to add to our understanding of the realities of employment within professional football. While the micro-political perspective has been utilized elsewhere within the sports coaching literature (e.g. Huggan et al., 2015; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Thompson, Potrac & Jones, 2015), the present study seeks to further our current understanding by focusing on the complex and contested process of organizational change. Moreover, research investigating

organizational change within professional sport has only recently received scholarly attention (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012). Specifically, previous research has concentrated on the leadership of change (Amis, Slack & Hinnings, 2004; Welty Peachey, Bruening & Burton, 2011), culture change within professional sport (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a; 2012b; Cruickshank, Collins & Minton, 2014), and repeated organizational change in professional football clubs (Wagstaff, Gilmore & Thelwell, 2015; 2016). Furthermore, although constant organizational change is an inherent factor within professional football, the academic field investigating such micro-level explorations of practice during change remains limited. As Gilmore and Gilson (2007) have outlined, ‘elite sport offers a fascinating view of change’ (p. 410). This work therefore offers rich and detailed narrative resources to support the education of those working within professional football and the impact of organizational change on individual day-to-day working practices, so that they are better able to see and act upon change (Gibson & Groom, 2018a, 2018b).

### ***The research project***

Part of a wider research project, the aim of the present study is to investigate the experiences of a professional coach during the process of organizational change within a professional football club. The project forms part of a nested case study of interrelated social actors, where each actor’s story is analysed in rich detail as a coherent contextual narrative (Gibson & Groom, 2018a). Specifically, this study focuses on the coach’s interpretations of the actions and behaviours of staff within the club during the process of change, and the subsequent impact of the change process on his self-understanding. This work aims to offer a novel way of thinking about the impact of managerial change for coaches employed within professional football clubs.

Four interrelated research questions guide this project to explore the participant's experiences of the change process in professional football:

RQ1: What changes were evident in the day-to-day coaching role of the participant coach during the process of organizational change, and how did the coach come to understand these changes?

RQ2: How did the participant coach experience the actions of others towards himself during the change process, and why did he come to understand the actions in this way?

RQ3: In what sense did the participant coach come to understand the micro-political realities of organizational change?

RQ4: How did the participant coach come to understand the impact of organizational change on his employment and sense of self as a coach?

The following section outlines the theoretical framework in which we situate this study in an attempt to further understand the complexities of employment within professional football during the process of organizational change.

### ***Theoretical framework: micro-politics and professional self-understanding***

The early micro-political work of Ball (1987), Blasé (1991), Kelchtermans (1993, 2005), and Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) that explored teachers' experiences within schools is now being applied within sports coaching contexts through the work of Potrac and Jones (2009a; 2009b), in order to better understand the working conditions of sports coaches. Theoretically, Kelchtermans' work follows a

constructivistic (Berger & Luckmann, 1985), contextualistic (Siegert & Chapman, 1987), and dynamic biographical interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1974; Nias, 1989), premised upon a conceptual grounding of narrative data to produce a more defined understanding of the self (Polkinghorne, 1998). The micro-political perspective recognizes that different interests and goals exist among workers in an organization (Ball, 1987). Specifically, micro-politics refers to the ‘strategies and tactics used by individuals and groups in an organization to further their interests’ (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002: 107). However, although influence and power can prompt conflict, tension, rivalry, and struggle, they can also encompass cooperation and coalition building in order to achieve desired goals (Blasé, 1991). Typically, micro-politics concerns itself with organizational functioning and the natural phenomena that arise during the process of collaboration, resistance, and interaction between stakeholders within the environment. Furthermore, Ball (1987) argues that differing ideologies around organizational and structural purposes can lead to skilled strategic action and political activity, revealing the contested nature of the pedagogical workplace (Potrac & Jones, 2009a).

### ***Personal interpretive framework and the professional self***

Central to Kelchtermans’ (1993) micro-political inquiry in the educational workplace are two frameworks: (1) *subjective educational theory*, which is the personal (‘subjective’) system (‘theory’) of knowledge and beliefs about education that teachers use to perform their jobs (i.e. ‘know how’), and (2) the *personal interpretive framework*, which is the set of beliefs and representations developed over time that operates as a lens through which employees perceive their job situation and their



behaviours. Within this study, the focus is specifically on Kelchtermans' (1993) notions of *the professional self* and *professional self-understanding* in order to further our appreciation of the micro-political reality faced by coaches when experiencing organizational change.

The *personal interpretive framework* comprises the career experiences of workers which provide them with a conception of themselves in their work-based identity and a system of knowledge and beliefs concerning their professional activity (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2005; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; 2009b). Within the *personal interpretive framework*, identity is viewed as dynamic and biographical in nature (i.e. developed over time), in that identity relates to the understanding one has of oneself at a certain moment in time (*product*), and this understanding forms part of on-going sense-making (*process*). While the experiences of life situations define who employees *are*, this sense of identity is also developed through reflection on *past* and *future* understandings of the *self*. Kelchtermans' (1993, 2005) notion of the *professional self* is the product of interaction with the environment and encompasses five sub-constructs: *self-image*, *self-esteem*, *job motivation*, *task perception* and *future prospects*.

### ***Self-image***

Self-image is important because it matters to practitioners how they see themselves and how others see them, and how they would typify themselves as an employee or more specifically *who* and what they *are* (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2005). According to studies of professional teachers, employees tend to reveal *self-image* in *self-descriptive* statements (Kelchtermans, 1993), for example, how they would describe themselves to others (i.e. 'what I am doing'). Description is often informed by

general principles that govern an employee's professional behaviour, aligned with the perceptions of other colleagues, leaders and significant others (Kelchtermans, 1993).

### ***Self-esteem***

Related to self-image, Kelchtermans (1993, 2005) highlighted that *self-esteem* refers to the *evaluation of oneself* as an employee (i.e. 'how good am I at my job?'). Answers to such questions lead to positive or negative levels of self-esteem. For example, within the teaching context, pupils appeared to be the most pertinent factor in determining a teacher's level of self-esteem (Kelchtermans, 1993), with good results and the quality of the pupils' relationship with the teacher at the heart of a positive level of self-esteem. Similarly, in coaching, a coach's sense of self may be mediated by the views of athletes. Furthermore, positive comparison with others is noted as important for maintaining self-esteem (e.g. with other coaches) as 'recognition by others is understood as a politics of identity' (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002: 111). Within this context, self-esteem can be understood to be constructed from the result of balancing self-image with the implicit professional norms of one's employment role and working practice (Kelchtermans, 1993). Therefore, the judgments of others play an important role in mediating the perception of role performance from the ideal and reality, where a negative balance causes employee demotivation (Kelchtermans, 1993).

### ***Job motivation***

According to Kelchtermans (1993, 2005), *job motivation* is *conative*, premised upon *directional effort* to select, stay in, or leave an employment position (i.e. 'the drive to be a teacher or coach'). Decreases in job motivation may be due to increases in

workplace demands and a decrease in social status and respect. Thus job motivation is interrelated with an employee's self-esteem (Kelchtermans, 1993).

### ***Task perception***

In relation to an appreciation of the professional self, premised upon the importance of retrospective experiences, Kelchtermans (1993) identifies *task perception* as the penultimate sub-construct, and it refers to the way that employees define their job (i.e. 'what ought I to be doing?'). Similarly, the quality of relations with students/athletes and the recognition of professional competence are significant in the evaluation of such an understanding. For example, key components that have been identified in relation to teachers who have developed a positive and satisfied perception of their job include autonomy and cooperation with colleagues, and stability in the work environment, rather than educational innovation and change (Kelchtermans, 1993).

### ***Future prospects***

From a prospective employment outlook, Kelchtermans (1993, 2005) identified *future prospects* as the final dimension in understanding the professional self. It encompasses the feelings and expectations that an employee has about their job situation and future employment opportunities (i.e. 'how do I see myself in my role in years to come and how do I feel about that?'). The desire to maintain the status quo dominates employees' expectations (Kelchtermans, 1993). However, the interrelated nature of self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, and task perception tends to influence employees' perception of future prospects. Where employees anticipate problems with role performance, they may seek to move away from the role to avoid the risk of developing low self-esteem (Kelchtermans, 1993).

## **Methodology**

### ***Philosophical underpinnings and research design***

The interpretive case study research design was rigorously developed, underpinned by an ideographic interpretive research methodology (i.e. focused on the individual case) that is premised upon a relativist ontology (i.e. there is no reality independent of perception) and epistemological subjectivism (i.e. knowledge is subjective and socially constructed). This research approach recognizes that ‘reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which it occurs’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1985: 13). Specifically, the interactionist-interpretive methodology employed within the present study seeks to explore the interests, motives, and actions of the participant coach and the subsequent meanings that he attaches to his behaviours and the behaviours of others during the change process within his professional football club (Blumer, 1969). Such a perspective is adopted to increase our understanding of issues about which very little is known, such as coaches’ experiences of organizational change in professional football (Gibson & Groom, 2018a, 2018b; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne & Nelson, 2013).

### ***Research purpose, approach and process***

The *purpose* of the case study was instrumental in nature, with the aim of further understanding the realities of the institutional and social contexts during a period of organizational change within a professional football academy (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001; Thomas, 2016) and with the end goal of further developing narrative resources for coaches and senior managers working within professional football academies

(Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Within the present study, change and the management of the change process are the reproduction of a socially negotiated organizational reality, where social action constructs and gives life to institutional change (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001).

Methodologically and theoretically the case study *approach* is guided by an interpretive interactionist stance (Blumer, 1969; Kelchtermans, 1993), in that human behaviour always results from a meaningful interaction with the environment or context (i.e. social, cultural, material, and institutional), and therefore organizational change is best understood relationally at the individual level (i.e. how individuals construct their own social reality based on their interactions with others).

Finally, the *process* of the present case study forms part of a larger multiple participant nested project at Alder FC (pseudonym) that involves the academy coaches Ian, James, John, George, and Richard (pseudonyms – see Table 1). Within the present study, the findings and rich empirical insights from Ian's *sense-making* are presented (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

### ***The case and context***

This study forms part of a larger nested interpretive case study project (i.e. the experiences of interrelated social actors) that explores the impact and micro-politics of organizational change in professional youth football at Alder FC (pseudonym). Our aim is to produce a contextually sensitive and rich descriptive narrative (i.e. settings, characters, plotlines, and critical incidents in employment), replete with the complexity of the interrelated nature of the lived nature of the participant's experiences of employment within a professional football academy during the process of organizational change. Within this study, Ian's (pseudonym) narrative is presented in

the way that he articulated his experiences to the research team through the process of narrative co-construction between Ian and the team.

At the time of the present study the principal author was employed as a part-time coach at Alder FC (see Table 1), a professional football club competing in Football League Two (the fourth tier of English professional football), and was assessed by the EPL to be working at Academy Category 3 within the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). As an employee within that environment the principal author experienced several organizational changes and witnessed several colleagues leaving the club as part of the change process. Alder FC was selected as a local knowledge case as the first author was a youth coach for the U16 team at the start of a process of organizational change (i.e. the institution becoming something new through the transformation of structure, operations, management systems, staffing resources, etc.). A local knowledge case offers an important strength in case study research. Here, the principal author's familiarity with the workplace enabled a greater level of contextual sensitivity to 'read' the people within the case (Thomas, 2016).

### **Insert Table 1 Here**

#### ***The participant***

Ian was identified as an information-rich source of insight into organizational change within a professional football club. Prior to data collection Ian ceased to be employed by Alder FC as part of the process of organizational change. He is now an academy coach at a Category 1 Academy, leading and assisting the U12-U13 teams and acting as coach educator for a national football association.

Following institutional ethical approval, Ian was approached and invited to take part in this nested case study examining organizational change at Alder FC. He subsequently agreed to share his thoughts and feelings relating to his experiences of being a social actor within the change process. Ian had coached at Alder FC for six years, both as a full-time football development coach and as a part-time academy coach. He held the UEFA B Licence and undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications within sport coaching. Ian's most recent role at Alder FC was that of Football Inclusion Manager and Head Coach of the U12 team. In addition to working with the U12 team, he also assisted with other groups within the U12-U16 age groups. Typically, Ian's contact time with his players would be three two-hour coaching sessions during the week and one match at the weekend. Furthermore, regulations enforced by the Premier League's EPPP meant that each coaching session and match required approximately one hour of planning and evaluation of every player's development.

### ***Data collection***

Data were collected by the principal author, Luke (see Table 1), who at the time was employed as an Academy Youth Development Phase coach and as the Head Coach of the U16 team. The data consist of ethnographic field notes and observations from informal meetings (i.e. during training and matches, coffee conversations, discussions in the car park, during travel to away matches, etc.), formal academy staff team meetings (i.e. monthly youth development phase staffing and planning, bi-monthly player assessment reviews, bi-annual in-house training), in-depth interviews with three co-workers regarding the period of organizational change (i.e. Richard, George, and James; see Table 1), and four in-depth, semi-structured interpretive interviews with Ian. The interview data from Ian resulted from around five hours of conversation in total.

Before data collection commenced, Ian was made aware of the purpose of the study and he provided informed consent for the findings of the work to be published. During the semi-structured interviews, Ian was encouraged to talk about his experiences of organizational change within the football club. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed prior to the next interview, a process that allowed the interviewer to identify significant issues with the data as they emerged and that informed the topics for the next interview, thus ensuring a process of reflexivity during the interview procedure. During this process the second author, an experienced qualitative researcher, acted as a ‘critical friend’, questioning the initial interpretations of the data and suggesting additional avenues to explore (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). During this process, both researchers would read interview transcripts and discuss narrative segments from the interviews in relation to the research questions. Often, the participant would mention something in initial interviews that was aligned to the research questions, and which was then further explored in detail in subsequent interviews. This might, for example, relate to specific examples from the participant’s experiences, the participant’s thoughts and emotions during the incident, and consideration of the wider impact of the incident upon the participant’s working conditions (e.g. RQ1–4). In the second and subsequent interviews Ian was asked to elaborate on previous discussions and invited to explore the relevant themes with the interviewer, prompting a reflexive interviewing approach specifically aimed at exploring the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind his experiences.

### ***Narrative data analysis***

The data were analysed using narrative thematic analysis in an inductive (themes within the interviews) and deductive (against ‘the professional self’ as a



conceptual lens) iterative process (Smith, Bundon & Best, 2016; Thomas, 2016). Following this analysis, narrative themes were identified in Ian's data through a methodical coding process (Smith et al., 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2002). Throughout this process, analytic memos in the form of preliminary and tentative annotations to the interview transcript were used to highlight provisional links between Ian's narrative and the theoretical concepts associated with professional self-understanding (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). These links were used to inform the questions for the following interview as part of an iterative process (Sparkes & Smith, 2002).

In assessing the validity of narrative research, Polkinghorne (2007) explains that:

Storied evidence is gathered not to determine if events actually happened but about the meaning experienced by people whether or not the events are actually described. The 'truths' sought by narrative researchers are 'narrative truths', not 'historical truths' (Spence, 1982). Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the event reported in the stories. Yet the meanings reported by the stories are responses to life events, whose descriptions need not be discounted wholesale. (Polkinghorne, 2007: 479)

Such an approach follows the tradition of German sociologist Max Weber in his discussion of *verstehen* (the sociological approach to understanding the meaning of action from the point of view of the participant). Indeed, it has been suggested that through such an exploration of the meaning that social actors attach to their interactions (i.e. the sense-making process), interpretive case studies can offer an explanation of social reality, through the articulation of the participant's world views and their motives

to behave in a certain way (Thacher, 2006). Therefore, we ask the readers to judge the quality of the work against the tenets of naturalistic generalization (Ruddin, 2006), aligned to the paradigmatic (ontological, epistemological and methodological) commitments of the research project (Smith, 2018). In this regard, naturalistic generalization is concerned with capturing the unique features of the study, through the presentation of a rich interpretive context-dependent understanding of employment within professional football (Flyvberg, 2006; Gibson & Groom, 2018a; Ruddin, 2006).

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***‘The new First Team Manager’s coming in’***

Ian started by providing an overview of the context of the organizational change at the club and how the initial stages of change affected the behaviour of staff around the First Team and in the academy:

It was pretty tense times. The club was struggling financially, there were questions about whether there was going to be a football club, and if there was no football club then there was no academy. It was just a bit of a funny atmosphere where nobody really knows what was going on, nobody really knows who is gunning for who and everybody is keeping their cards close to their chest. The feeling among the staff was a little bit of nervousness. This new First Team Manager is coming in; this new regime was coming in. There are a lot of eyes on the academy all of a sudden and there is people trying to strengthen and retain their own positions and justify their job and look good in front of the new gaffer

[First Team Manager]. Nervous and on your toes would probably be the vibe at the time among the other coaches, I think. We talked about it among ourselves as staff after training, and it was a little bit of Chinese whispers in that ... 'Oh well, he's said this to this person and they've said it to another member of staff.' So that stuff kind of gets passed around.

Ian's narrative indicated that the introduction of organizational change prompted periods of ambiguity and dissonance for the working practices within that organization (Ball, 1987; Buchanan & Badham, 2004; Kramer & Neale, 1998). Indeed, changes are seldom neutral and tend to benefit or disadvantage certain individuals or groups. Ball (1987: 32) contends that new ways of working can destabilize traditions and frequently affect 'the career prospects of individuals or groups which may in turn be curtailed or fundamentally diverted'. This was reflected in Ian's description of staff ensuring that they were 'keeping their cards close to their chest' while trying to 'strengthen and retain their own position'.

Specifically, the new First Team Manager comprehensively evaluated the whole academy. Ian outlined the scrutiny that he and his age group faced during the preliminary stages of the restructuring:

So going from the previous manager who wasn't really interested in youth and he'd never really given youth a chance to this guy [new First Team Manager] coming in and all of a sudden it was all about youth development and giving lads a chance and all this kind of stuff. So there was definitely more of a focus and attention from the club. There was

more of a PR spin from the club to show the emphasis on developing young players in the media but also from the First Team Manager himself. He started to take a real interest in certain age groups.

Ian indicated how this affected his understanding of his own *professional self* in managing and coping with such levels of uncertainty. He highlighted his concern about the comments made by the Academy Manager to his age group when they were seen to be underperforming during this period of organizational change and during the First Team Manager's review of the academy:

The group that I was working with was struggling with results for months and the Academy Manager [Richard] came and we were having a debrief and a bit of a chat after the match and they'd been beaten 3–1. It was a close match and he just came in and sort of said 'Listen, lads, if you lot don't improve then you're out', basically at the start of the session. Gave the lads both barrels. Basically, 'If you don't start winning matches' – he didn't use those words, but that's what was implied – 'then we'll just get other lads in who will win football matches.' Whether they had to send the results of fixtures through to the Youth Director and First Team Manager, all that, I don't know. I probably think that was the case. There seemed to be a shift to 'Did you win?' from previously 'How did you play?', and people were making judgments from scores rather than how they played.

Ian described how this scrutiny affected how he managed and carried out his work:

I was honest with them [the players] and said ‘Listen, you’ve heard what he’s [Academy Manager: Richard] said the other night; we’re all under a bit of pressure here. We could do with winning today, you could do with it, and I could do with it. But having said that, let’s play the way that we’re supposed to play and win in the right way’, and they responded to it. So I suppose I cheated a little in that when people were around asking and observing I changed things to look like I was complying, but when people weren’t watching I knew the lads had to win because that was what seemed to matter to the First Team Manager and the Academy Manager [Richard]. But you couldn’t be seen to be directly telling the lads they needed to win, if that makes sense.

Ian’s strategy of ‘complying’ when people were ‘observing’ him reflects Kelchtermans and Ballet’s (2002) notions of micro-political literacy, and concepts of the *knowledge*, *operational*, and *experiential* aspects (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1996) of developing micro-political literacy. Ian’s indication that he ‘cheated a little’ represents a tactic in his repertoire of micro-political strategies within the operational aspect of micro-political literacy (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002: 117) that was aimed at ensuring that his team achieved a positive result to deflect attention away from his age group. However, it should be noted that such strategies are context specific (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), in that what worked for Ian in this instance may or may not be as effective in another professional football club.

***‘Your face needs to fit’***

Ian was aware of how coaches associated employment with the importance of political strategy during organizational change: ‘... he [a coach] knows football inside out; he knows your face needs to fit. He’s very pleasant to people in meetings, makes the right noises and doesn’t oppose anything, he’s agreeing with them [academy management staff].’ Ian reported a conversation he had with Eric, another coach, at this time, when Eric said: ‘He [John] is a snake; watch him because he will be stitching people up left, right, and centre trying to work his way into a full-time job. You can’t trust him; he will be stabbing you in the back to boost his profile.’ When prompted further about his interpretation of the conversation, Ian elaborated:

I think the reason that Eric felt the need to tell me about this was that he was concerned about his own job; maybe he wanted to vent or maybe he wanted me to understand why John was acting in such a way. He was pretty aware that John had been in a similar position to him at another club and I think he was saying to me, ‘Look, John might do you to try and get his foot higher up the ladder to then try and do me at a later stage’, and stuff like that. Eric was an experienced coach so I think he had seen it all before and wanted to make me aware of how coaches tend to work during these periods.

Numerous studies have highlighted the impact that organizational change has on the employment of staff and the opportunities for promotion and demotion within performance sport teams (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a, 2012b; Cruickshank, Collins

& Minten, 2013). However, a discussion about the underhand tactics of coaches jostling for promotion opportunities or avoiding demotion within the change process is lacking. Ian's experience of other coaches trying to get their feet 'higher up the ladder' provides an insight into the underhand tactics that coaches may employ during periods of organizational change in their search for these opportunities.

Understanding how coaches manage others' perceptions in such situations provides a platform for Ian to reflect on his own professional self, and the *task perception* (Kelchtermans, 1993) he associates with his own role in similar meetings and the possibility of such face-work (Goffman, 1959) in defining his job role. Kelchtermans (1993: 449) suggests that the answer to such issues 'operates as a personal program and as a norm to evaluate their own professional behavior'. The information he received from Eric gave Ian the necessary knowledge to interpret and understand the micro-political character of a particular situation during these periods of organizational change. The *knowledge aspect* is crucial in developing micro-political literacy (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), and without it the development of an appropriate strategy and tactic within the *operational aspect* of micro-political literacy becomes skewed and misinformed.

### ***'We're nothing to do with this group'***

To provide a deeper insight into the actions and behaviours of his colleagues during the organizational change, Ian recalled being put through a 'test' that would determine his competence as a coach. The 'test' described by Ian was a match that his U12 team were to play against another U12 team. Ian's team were already considered to be underperforming and Ian understood that this was common knowledge among the other academy coaching staff:

Previously at training games, the lads [coaches] would stand just off the left of my shoulder, sort of predominantly on my side, and we would chat during the game, have a bit of banter and discuss the lads and how they were performing. This time they [coaches] were stood on the halfway line, right up against the fence away from me and we didn't talk all game. They've not done that before. It was as if to say, 'We're nothing to do with this group or Ian, we're impartial.' It was as if they thought that if they were seen to be associated with a poor age group then they would be judged accordingly.

Ian's perception of the rationale behind the actions of his fellow coaches identifies the possibility that coaches are faced with *coping with visibility* (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) within their coaching practice. Indeed, in their work on teacher socialization, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002: 111) suggest the notion of 'working in a fishbowl', and that in spite of their relative isolation in the classroom, teachers are subjected to observations by colleagues, principals, and others (Kelchtermans, 1993). Ian's response echoes the above situation when he was prompted to make sense of other coaches' actions during the aforementioned training game:

Nigel, John and Omar (pseudonyms) were coming over to strengthen their own position because the microscope was on me ... and the First Team Manager is there, the Academy Manager [Richard] is there. I'm concentrating on my team and how I can help them out and there's conversations going on behind me about the players and stuff. Like I



said, previously they would be stood next to me having those conversations and there would be an honesty about it. So for me it's a little bit of 'Let's pan these players, let's pan this coach' by saying 'That's not very good, this isn't very good. I've spotted that issue, so I'm a good coach.' It was as if they knew I was under pressure; the lads weren't doing very well and they didn't want to be seen to be associated with it in any way in front of the gaffer [First Team Manager] or Academy Manager.

In his characterization of *professional self-understanding*, Kelchtermans (1993) highlighted that the sub-construct of *self-image* relates to how teachers think others perceive them. In this situation, the First Team Manager and Academy Manager being present may have influenced the coaches' negative discussion about Ian being a poor coach, leaving their *true* perception of Ian as a coach open to question, regardless of his interpretation of the discussion. In light of this, the data further support the findings of Thompson et al. (2015) in their discussion about coaches being stigmatized by peers. Ian's interpretation of the other academy coaches 'putting down' him and his players to satisfy their own agendas relates to the work of Leary and Schreindorfer (1998: 15), who assert that stigmatization is a process whereby 'individuals are stigmatized to the extent that others shun, reject or ostracize them'. Kelchtermans' (1993) work and the notion of *self-esteem* in developing one's *professional self-understanding* can be used to further understand how Ian experienced the effect that the increased scrutiny on his age group had on his evaluation of himself as a coach:

I think that whenever you have results that aren't going your way you start to question yourself a little bit, don't you, regardless of whether results are supposed to matter or not at this age. For me, it was more about, was I letting these lads down? I felt horrible for them because I knew that they knew they were under pressure. Kids of that age shouldn't have to experience that in an academy. You want to shield them a little bit at times. But at the same time, you are mindful that it could be your head on the chopping board, and it was!

***'I've got rid of Ian'***

Ian reported the fate that followed his final game, or his 'test' as he described it, after he had been subjected to unusual levels of scrutiny by the First Team Manager, the Academy Manager, and the other coaches during this period of organizational change. Ian related similar findings from his experience of leaving the football club:

He [Academy Manager: Richard] knew that he needed to do something with this group; he couldn't be seen to be having a group that was consistently getting beat. It was in his best interest to go back to the First Team Manager and say 'I've got rid of Ian.' It wasn't in his best interests to say that I was unhappy with the pressure that the lads and I were being put under. So I think he manipulated what was said in the conversation to strengthen his position a little and to suit his own agenda. Obviously, if the gaffer [First Team Manager] isn't happy with an age group and the Academy Manager then goes and sacks the coach of that age group, it's a feather in the cap of the Academy Manager. I know I said 'I'm not

happy.’ That was one of the first things that I said. I think that I was seen to be made a bit of a scapegoat. Richard [Academy Manager] just said that the gaffer [First Team Manager] has said that he’s not happy with the way that your team played. So, anyway, Richard just said ‘It’s probably best for us to go our separate ways and we’ll look after you in terms of wages and I’ll tell the lads that you decided you wanted to leave.’ For me, I’d gone from being asked by the club to be interviewed by the EPPP auditors one month and then six weeks later being questioned about this, that, and the other. So you’ve gone from being one of the main sort of people and ‘flavour of the month-ish’ to ‘this group is struggling and it’s his [Ian’s] fault’.

Ian describes the discussion he had with the Academy Manager about the poorly performing group that he coached. Again, drawing on the concept of a *professional self-understanding* of his role at the football club, the findings highlight the importance of *job motivation* in achieving this understanding. Ian highlighted the change from the high regard he had been held in previously, in being asked by the club to be interviewed by the EPPP auditors, to being forced out of the club.

Ian’s perception of the strategy that the Academy Manager used to influence the situation for his own benefit was also interesting. Ian described his thoughts after hearing from other coaches that the Academy Manager saw Ian’s unhappiness as an opportunity to improve his own status by telling Ian that he was no longer required at the club. As Ian stated, ‘I think Richard thought that he could portray it as, “Well, I’ve done something about this group, I’m prepared to take the bull by the horns, I’ve done you a favour, gaffer [First Team Manager], so when it comes to dishing out contracts,

remember me and what I've done.”” Political strategies and tactics such as this are not completely absent from the study of performance sport, as Poczwadowski, Henschen and Barott (2002) reported similar findings in their study of coach–athlete relationships. Previously studies have utilized social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974) to explain the maintenance of a relationship between an athlete and a coach. Specifically, the notion of ‘profit’ as a concept of social exchange theory can aid the understanding of the Academy Manager’s actions in doing the ‘gaffer’ a favour in order to be remembered when it came to ‘dishing out contracts’. Poczwadowski et al. (2002: 104) explained that ‘profit from a social exchange can be important in maintaining a relationship’ (e.g. between the Academy Manager and the First Team Manager). Indeed, if the relationship does not produce a perceived profit, and there is freedom to terminate the relationship, then it is unlikely to be continued. However, as Blau (1964) suggests, the social context of the organization is key in defining the exchange.

***‘You’ve got to be savvy towards it’***

Finally, a reflective account demonstrated an understanding of the importance of managing the contextual and political environments of a professional football club during periods of organizational change, as Ian explains:

I think if I was to go back in ... it’s important to be able to read situations and to read some of the underlying things that are going on around the club, whether you’re full time or part time. That’s the worst bit of the job. All the shit that goes with it. The good bit is working with the players and developing relationships with them; the other bit is the political side of things, and if you’re not a political animal, you get

swallowed up. You've got to be savvy [politically shrewd] towards it. I should probably have been a bit savvier if I wanted to stay. But ultimately it wouldn't have sat right with me. It stands you in good stead for the future. People make decisions about you without watching your sessions, so sometimes judgments are nothing to do with your coaching. I don't feel as though they could have got rid of me because they hadn't watched me coach in any depth. They just took a snapshot of one game.

Ian described his feelings after being let go and his slight desire to take up a new, similar position, stating that 'when it got to around July time, you start to miss doing a bit of training. Everyone was coming back in for pre-season.' Ian's feelings about leaving the club can be understood using Kelchtermans' (1993) notion of *future prospects*. Being part of a club for a significant amount of time, and subsequently undergoing such negative experiences towards the end of that time, can affect an employee's perception of the likelihood of securing similar employment in the future (Kelchtermans, 1993). Indeed, as Ian stated, on reflection questions about his behaviour and actions during those times and how he could have acted differently are pertinent. In describing the employment environment of professional football, Ian explained that 'if you're not a political animal, you get swallowed up. You've got to be savvy towards it.'

## **Conclusion**

This purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Ian, an academy coach, working within a professional football club during a period of organizational change. To address this, four interrelated research questions were proposed to examine

Ian's experience of organizational change within the present study. The findings from Research Question 1, that examined the changes that were evident in Ian's day-to-day coaching role, and how Ian came to understand these changes, demonstrated that organizational change influenced Ian's coaching role in a negative manner because of threat to Ian's job security and employment at Alder FC. Specifically, the findings revealed that the new First Team Manager's scrutiny of the academy affected Ian's working practices, leading to a 'tense and nervous atmosphere', with Ian highlighting that there was a shift in attitude from 'How did you play?' to 'Did you win?'. Ian came to recognize that during the process of organizational change 'it could be your head on the chopping board'.

The findings of Research Question 2, that examined the influence of organizational change on Ian's perception of the actions of others, highlighted how Ian indicated that following the scrutiny of his age group, other coaches disassociated themselves from him. In Ian's words, 'it was as if to say "We're nothing to do with this group or Ian".' Ian also described the dissatisfaction of going from being 'one of the main sort of people' and 'flavour of the month-ish' to no longer being employed by the club while the change process was happening. Indeed, Ian explained how communications within the club were politicised during Ian's departure from Alder FC (e.g. 'I've got rid of Ian. It wasn't in his best interests to say that I was unhappy... I think he manipulated what was said in the conversation to strengthen his position a little and to suit his own agenda').

The findings of Research Question 3, which examined in what sense did Ian come to understand the micro-political realities of organizational change, were most evident in Ian's conversations and interactions with others such as Eric that focused upon coaches seeing change as an opportunity to 'stitch' each other up and 'stab each

other in the back' to promote themselves, while acting in a Machiavellian manner (e.g. 'he's a snake'). However, in becoming accustomed to the micro-politics of organizational change in professional football, Ian explained that 'It stands you in good stead for the future.'

Finally, in addressing Research Question 4, which examined Ian's sense of self as a coach following his experiences of organizational change, Ian concluded that 'you've got to be savvy towards it' and 'read some of the underlying things that are going on around the club, whether you're full time or part time'. Ian also recognized a lack of micro-political literacy and micro-political action on his part to retain his employment within Alder FC. As he explained, 'I should probably have been a bit savvier if I wanted to stay.' However, Ian also came to make sense of the process of change and the impact upon his sense of self by reasoning that people make decisions about you without watching your sessions, so sometimes judgments are nothing to do with your coaching: 'I don't feel as though they could have got rid of me because they hadn't watched me coach in any depth.'

Such insights highlight the complex interaction between the five sub-constructs of Kelchtermans' (1993, 2005) *professional self* within a highly competitive, accountable, and political working environment: *self-image* (i.e. what I am doing), *self-esteem* (i.e. how good am I at my job?), *job motivation* (i.e. the drive I have in my employment role), *task perception* (i.e. what ought I to be doing?), and *future prospects* (i.e. what I see myself doing in the future and what opportunities exist for me).

These findings add further weight to the work of others (e.g. Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Potrac et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2015) in illustrating the contested and politically driven nature of working in professional and semi-professional football. Similarly, this work builds upon the work of Roderick and colleagues (Roderick, 2006a,

2006b; Roderick, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2017) and provides further support to the contention that those working within professional clubs quickly gain an appreciation of the labour market, limited employment tenure, and surplus of potential labour (Roderick, 2006a). Indeed, within this study, Kelchtermans' (1993) articulation of *professional self-understanding*, derived from working with teachers, provided a novel and useful theoretical lens with which to better understand Ian's experiences of working in professional football.

Methodologically, an interpretive case study approach to scholarly investigation has its limitations in that concerns regarding generalizability become secondary to context rich substantive empirical insights. Nevertheless, as Kelchtermans (1993: 154) stated, 'the research experience with the biographical perspective only deepened my belief that to understand the lives, one must get the story'. To further our understanding of organizational change in professional football, future investigations should focus on the stories of other practitioners who have similar or contrasting experiences, to allow for a deeper theoretical understanding of how to manage and cope with such change. Subsequently, by understanding how biographical experience has informed manager's approaches to organizational change, this perspective allows us to 'not so much focus on the facts, but rather on the meaning they have for the respondent' (Kelchtermans, 1993, p. 444). Specifically, the field would benefit from an empirical investigation into how organizational and managerial change can influence the *professional self-interests* of coaches practising within professional football (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). In particular, focusing on the self-interests, organizational interests, and social-professional interests of those coaches would provide a valuable insight into the change process for those employed within professional football.



From a practical perspective, we would encourage discussions about the realities of employment within the insecure nature of professional football becoming an increasingly important part of the education of coaches. That is, coaches should seek to develop *micro-political literacy* as part of their professional coaching repertoire. The importance of understanding how others within the coaching environment may impact upon a coach's *self-image*, *self-esteem*, *job motivation*, *task perception* and *future prospects* should be acknowledged. In addition, understanding how to work with others with, at times, contradictory goals forms an important part of organizational life (Potrac & Jones, 2009a). From a club perspective, the newly formed role of Head of Coaching under the EPPP, with a remit to support, develop, and educate coaches to work within professional environments, may be a fruitful avenue to further explore coach education *in situ*, and, specifically, to look at how a Head of Coaching may be able to educate neophyte coaches about the realities of working within such a competitive, dynamic, and insecure workplace.

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Table 1. Key social actors with Alder FC Academy

<b>Key actors</b>	<b>Organizational role within Alder FC Academy<sup>1</sup></b>
Richard	Academy Manager <sup>2</sup>
George	Head of Professional Development Phase <sup>3</sup> and U18s Coach
John	Head of Youth Development Phase <sup>4</sup> and U13s Coach
James	Head of Foundation Phase <sup>5</sup> and U11s Coach
Ian	Academy Coach U12s <sup>5</sup>
Author A	Academy Coach U16s <sup>4</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Within the Youth Development Rules, an Academy is an establishment for the coaching and education of Academy players operated by a Club in accordance with the requirements of the rules of the Professional Game Board of the Football Association.

<sup>2</sup>Within this structure, the Academy Manager is the person responsible for the strategic leadership and operation of a Club's Academy. An Academy Player is a male player (other than an Amateur or a Trialist) who is in an age group between Under 9 and Under 21 and who is registered for and who is coached by or plays football for or at a Club which operates an Academy.

<sup>3</sup>Professional Development Phase players aged 17–21 years.

<sup>4</sup>Youth Development Phase players aged 13–16 years.

<sup>5</sup>Foundation Phase players aged 6–12 years.

<sup>6</sup>Under the Youth Development Rules, each Club is required to prepare a Coaching Programme that states (a) the Club's Football Philosophy, (b) the Club's Academy Performance Plan and (c) the Elite Player Performance Plan that stipulates the minimum hours of coaching across each level in the Academy.